

## Gun program is working, officials say

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Statistics released Monday show that a federally funded program to reduce gun violence in Omaha is working, officials said, though similar figures also show an increase in gang violence last year.

Felony gun assaults have dropped by 38 percent since March 2003, while federal prosecution for gun crime increased by 70 percent, officials said at a press conference Monday.

The program, Project Safe Neighborhoods, in February 2003 began distributing federal funding to create community initiatives, fund police operations and raise awareness of the consequences of gun crime.

"We're pleased with the progress, though obviously there's still work to be done," Omaha Police Chief Thomas Warren said. Mayor Mike Fahey and U.S. Attorney Mike Heavican also attended the press conference.

Although reducing gang violence is a major component of the program, gang-related homicides increased significantly last year. Nearly half of last year's homicides were gang-related - there were 15 in 2003, up nine from the year before.

The statistics don't tell the whole story, said U.S. Attorney's Office spokesman Joe Jeanette. A program targeting local gangs, "Guns, Gangs and Drugs," has been effective, he said, pointing to the decrease in gun-related homicides since January. Six have been reported this year, down from 10 between January 2003 and June 2003.

"Looking at our numbers this year, the stats are saying to us that we're starting to make inroads into combating gang violence," Jeanette said. Project Safe Neighborhoods is effective because it encourages state and federal courts to cooperate to find long sentences for gun-related crimes, Heavican said.

"We have pretty good anecdotal evidence that they are scared about being put in jail," Heavican said, referring to criminals.

In many cases, state courts do not have minimum sentences they must apply to cases involving illegal gun use, but federal courts do. By allowing a federal court to prosecute such a crime, a longer sentence can more consistently be applied.

The program has sent \$643,000 to Nebraska since 2003.

About \$300,000 has gone toward law enforcement and community programs, \$200,000 has been spent on advertising, and the rest has funded research into the effectiveness of the program.

The program is technically statewide, but because the majority of gun violence occurs in the Omaha metropolitan area and in Lincoln, the majority of funding has been spent there.

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